

## INVESTIGACIONES / RESEARCH

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# Advertising Stereotypes and Gender Representation in Social Networking Sites

Estereotipos publicitarios y representaciones de género en las redes sociales

## ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of adolescent self-presentations in Fotolog. The images which these adolescents create and share through the Net focus on the construction of the Self. Here gender and sexuality become the main structuring factors of representation. Results point to the fact adolescents self-presentations mirror some of the categories defined by Goffman in his study of gender hyperritualization in advertising. Moreover, other gender expressions are found in the sample, such as the lesbian pose or the erotization of bodies which Gill also detects in advertising. Despite the fact that the images that adolescents upload in Social Networking Sites reproduce gender stereotypes and patriarchal patterns based in advertising, it must be said that they also elaborate a relatively varied repertoire of pictures and are able to conceive original creations. These creative self-representations are the outcome of a process of negotiation of gender and sexual identity which occurs in these settings, as well as in other adolescent media practices. To avoid a thoughtless reproduction of gender stereotypes and contribute to a critical negotiation of these representations, media education is needed. This media education should take into account the way in which adolescent practices are shaped by other media consumption.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta los resultados del análisis cuantitativo y cualitativo de las autopresentaciones que los y las adolescentes elaboran para Fotolog. Las imágenes que dichos adolescentes crean y comparten a través de la Red están centradas en el sí mismo, y el género y la sexualidad constituyen el eje principal de la representación. Los resultados obtenidos apuntan a que algunas de las categorías que estableció Goffman en su estudio sobre la hiperritualización de la feminidad en la publicidad están presentes en las autopresentaciones analizadas. Además, aparecen otras expresiones de género como la pose lésbica o la erotización de los cuerpos que ya han sido detectadas también en los análisis de la publicidad desarrollados por autoras como Gill. Si bien estas imágenes reproducen estereotipos de género y patrones patriarcales, hay que destacar la presencia de un repertorio variado y algunas creaciones originales, resultado de la negociación identitaria que, respecto al género y a la sexualidad, tiene lugar en estos espacios y otras prácticas mediáticas adolescentes. Para evitar una reproducción irreflexiva de patrones de género estereotipados y contribuir a una negociación crítica de estas representaciones sería importante que la educación mediática tuviera en cuenta la manera en que las prácticas adolescentes en las redes sociales se están nutriendo de otros consumos mediáticos y cómo esto afecta a lo que los y las adolescentes expresan en las redes.

## KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Social networking Sites, adolescence, interaction, identity, socialization processes, gender stereotypes, sexual stereotypes, advertising.

Redes sociales, adolescencia, interacción, identidad, procesos de socialización, estereotipos de género, estereotipos sexuales, publicidad.

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## 1. Introduction

In a survey by the Pfizer Foundation (2009), it was found that 92.6 percent of young people aged 11-20 participate in social networking sites (SNS). Tuenti, Facebook and Fotolog were the first, second and third sites most used by the interviewees. From other studies we get very similar figures, except for Catalonia, where Fotolog is the second SNS with the most users, with Facebook as third choice (Sánchez & Fernández, 2010). For Sánchez and Fernández (2010), SNS use is highly intensive: 66 percent of those surveyed use such sites on a daily basis, while 18 percent do so more than once per week. Genderwise, 42.9 percent of girls and 34.5 percent of boys log on to these networking sites several times a day. Given the pervasiveness of SNS in teenagers' lives, it is worth looking into some of the practices in which adolescents (Spanish adolescents in this case) engage in such spaces, and more specifically, into those more closely connected to their own self-presentation.

Insofar as, in social networking sites, identities are largely created as display identities, it makes sense that we focus an analysis of such spaces on the ritualization that takes place in self-presentation processes. In a sense, teenagers end up engaging in a kind of praxis not dissimilar to that of advertisers, who, according to Goffman (1979), ritualize what is already ritualized. This means they take gender manifestations that we all share socially and reshape them while exaggerating some of their traits. In their self-presentations, these youngsters seek to strike flashy, attention-seeking poses, and to that end, the gendered depictions they make of themselves tend to be modeled on those they find in advertising and in other audiovisual formats, whose gender stereotypes they often adapt and reproduce.

Our study focused on a specific social networking site, Fotolog, and analyzed the kinds of self-presentations and interactions we found in it. We performed a quantitative content analysis on a sample of 400 Spanish teenagers' photoblogs to determine what types of images are shared on this site in particular, as well as a critical and qualitative analysis (an in-depth study of the albums posted on 18 photoblogs) to understand how adolescents make sense of the pictures they post on these virtual spaces – that is how they negotiate both their gender identities and the meaning of attractiveness (to themselves and to others). The analysis shows how these teens engage in hyper-ritualization, what resources they use for self-presentations, what similarities these share with gender representations in advertising, and how adolescents' gender identities are shaped through their interactions in these spaces.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Social networking sites, image and gender identity

In recent years, several studies have sustained that both personal web pages and SNS provide a significant environment for identity exploration (Stern, 2004; Manago & al., 2008), for teenagers' self-presentation (Stern, 2004), and for the social comparison and expression of idealized aspects of what one is and would like to be (Manago & al., 2008); some of such works have also suggested that social networking sites have a remarkable bearing on socialization and, more specifically, on the construction of gender identity (García-Gómez, 2010; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Seivick-Bortree, 2005; Sveningsson, 2008; Thelwall, 2008).

For Livingstone (2009), identity and on-line relations are jointly determined by the technical possibilities of SNS and by teenage peer culture (both on- and off-line). Other authors have also demonstrated a reciprocal influence among different spaces in which adolescents take part (Seivick-Bortree, 2005) and have pointed out the existence of a series of conventions that make these teens' web pages look much alike (Stern, 2002).

The sites young users create acquire meaning from the connections they establish in them as they create them, update them and post comments in them. Teenagers are keener on sharing their privacy, so to speak –that is, on creating spaces for intimacy that, building on the links they establish to their peers, allow them to be themselves– than on protecting that privacy per se. They thus redefine privacy, as it is no longer about what information one reveals, but about controlling who gets to know what and what one tells about oneself (Livingstone, 2009).

Girls create their personal pages intentionally and strategically and make decisions regarding what they want those pages to look like and what they wish their audience to know about them (Stern, 2002). Likewise, boys pay considerable attention to the images of themselves they pick for their own profiles on social sites (Siibak, 2010). In spaces such as those provided by Facebook, users seem to prefer showing rather than saying, yet, at the same time, they tend to favor implicit and mediated poses over explicit identity statements. In a sense, they build their own hoped-for possible selves – these are socially desirable selves that cybersnauts present to others and are related to identities that are not fully established in off-line environments yet (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008). What a teenager reveals about herself (or himself) can help her achieve greater social control; this is therefore a strategic act

she performs in order to induce those socially desired results she is trying to obtain, to manage the impression she makes on other people, and to earn social approval (Stern, 2004).

Personal web pages allow their publishers to signal who they are and how they want to be seen by others (Stern, 2004). Nicknames usually become a major vehicle for the sharing of identity information (Subrahmanyam, Smahel & Greenfield, 2006), although the two features that page owners are especially intent on controlling are their profile pictures and their status tags. In fact, photographs are the only thing that users update regularly in their personal pages (Young, 2009). Pictures are mostly significant as a tool to manage impressions and, as such, they are very much consciously used for identity exposition purposes on social networking sites (Siiback, 2010). According to Young (2009), seven factors explain why these users choose a particular photograph; foremost among them is their wish to look good (or as good as possible) and to project a desired image of themselves. These findings agree with Seivick-Bortree's (2005): adolescents tend to represent themselves in a way they think others may like them more – in a way (that is) that they become more desirable would-be sexual/love partners.

Our study approached teenage media practice by examining how adolescents use Fotolog. This photoblogging service allows them to create a means of self-expression revolving around images – the very images teenagers are using to represent themselves and to share their own affective experiences.

## 2.2. Gender displays in advertising

Goffman (1979) studied gender displays, that is, the ways gender is conventionally described in advertising. Such displays (that is the ways in which male and/or female human subjects are shown) tend to be both cast and received as natural. As people in general (not only as men or as women in particular) we all have the ability to learn to project (and interpret) representations of masculinity and femininity. Rather than gender identities, people's behavior choreographs portraits of relationships and society devotes a considerable amount of its own substance to that kind of staging.

Goffman (1979; 1991) took an interest in the connection between advertising and society's need to fill social situations with ceremonial (with such ceremonies acting as a way for mutual orientation among their participants) and he found that both in advertising and in life at large we long to strike colorful poses. Something that is already a ritual can in turn become ritualized; this results in hyper-ritualization. To find an example of hyper-ritualized messages, we need to look no further than to the way advertisers use poses and attributes in their ads and commercials yielding extreme forms/levels of standardization, exaggeration

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and simplification. «If anything, advertisers conventionalize our conventions, stylize what is already a stylization, make frivolous use of what is already something considerably cut off from contextual controls. Their hype is hyper-ritualization» (Goffman, 1979: 84).

From such a focus on expressions of femininity and masculinity in advertising displays, Goffman infers a series of categories –corresponding to different patterns of gender representation: relative size, the feminine touch, function ranking, the family, the ritualization of subordination and licensed withdrawal– whose relevance has been highlighted in later studies by Kang (1997), and Döring & Pöschl (2006). Relative size refers to a particular advertisement/commercial set design in which women appear to be smaller and shorter than men. Similarly, we see the feminine touch when women are displayed more often than men in scenes in which they «touch» things (or themselves) with no apparently functional end – simply caressing them (or themselves) with their own hands or with other parts of their bodies as if both those hands and their owners were something particularly precious. By function ranking, Goffman meant those situations in

which men are portrayed as playing the main executive role to the detriment of female co-workers, who are then displayed as merely supporting agents. In such tableaux, men tend to be shown teaching women, and women are more frequently portrayed as getting help from men. Similarly, advertising favors the ritualization of subordination, especially as women are often displayed in lying positions (on the floor or on a bed), with their knees folded or their heads more markedly bent than men's. In advertising, female figures also smile more frequently and more openly than male ones. They also tend to show themselves with their feet crossed or in childlike body positions, even clow-

sexual desire, and sexually attractive (hot) lesbians.

There has also been an increasing objectification of men's bodies in the media (Murnen & al., 2003; Siibak, 2010). The erotic male is a growingly pervasive figure in standard advertising representations, where men show more and more signs of sight- and touch-related objectification similar to those previously defined by Goffman for women (Rohlinger, 2002). This so-called «sixpack advertising» –or the representation of men as sex objects more generally– poses no real threat to male dominance because the female gaze at those bodies does not subvert society's preexisting gaze (Gill, 2009). Neither hegemonic masculinity nor

heterosexuality as an institution are challenged by such an objectification, as several resources (e.g., the kinds of activities men carry out in those representations, the gazes they give back, or the independence they proudly display in those ads/commercials) check and balance any potential doubt that might have arisen from it. Therefore, male dominance does not seem to be incompatible with the sexualized representation of men's bodies (Gill, 2009).

Men's images may have been transformed but so have

the sexualized representations of women (Gill, 2009). One of such new figures regarding the display of women as sexual subjects is the so-called midriff, a self-presentational resource used by female posers who, in fact, aim to display themselves as sex objects. Always ready for sex and trying deliberately to deploy their sexual powers, the stated intention of women represented in that way is not to seek men's approval, but their own pleasure. That is why the discourse attached to such images emphasizes choice and empowerment.

However, such representations smoothly fit an older, classical pattern of attractiveness (extolling young, pretty and heterosexual women) and highlight specific body parts (breasts, backside, hair, lips and eyes). Another one of those changes recently identified in these female sexual displays is a new figure in the representation of relations between women that might be termed as the hot lesbian (Gill, 2007; 2009). These are women who are never shown alone but in the company of some other female partner(s): all of them

**Social networking sites are spaces of risk and opportunity deeply affected by gender, and are becoming arenas for negotiation in an increasingly sexualized media environment. As our study shows, self-presentations in SNS resort to the kinds of representational strategies already seen in those media environments and even contribute to spread, popularize and normalize them.**

ning or playing around. We also see them more often taking men by their hands, while men tend to put their arms around women's shoulders. Finally, the licensed withdrawal is what we witness when we see women absorbed in their own thoughts, disoriented and/or in need of protection. These women's minds appear to be somewhere else as they take a look at their own hands or touch some object to which they seem to pay no attention. Women are displayed more often than men in a sort of protected participation, whether shielded by something that covers them partially or curled up – or, in more openly protective displays, being hugged for consolation. They are also shown with their hands covering their mouth or their face, or introducing one finger between their lips.

Other authors have developed new concepts to define other types of figures that show up in ads and commercials. Gill (2009) identified a series of newer representational practices in advertising –consolidated over the last ten years or so– including eroticized male bodies, heterosexual women's explicit displays of

are attractive, all look very much alike, and we get to see them kissing, hugging or caressing each other. However, this representation seems to work much more effectively as a (rather trite) heterosexual male fantasy than as a truly homosexual female one. We have seen this figure widely reproduced in adolescent self-representations on Fotolog, and we have categorized it elsewhere as the lesbian pose (Tortajada & al., 2012). In these young users' photoblogs, such pictures usually depict girls kissing each others' lips or hugging; they seem to be trying to lead potential viewers on, but not necessarily female ones: from their statements and from other pictures in their albums one can tell that the girls posing in those photographs are plainly heterosexual.

Historically, men's and women's kinds of attractiveness have been valued differently. For Gómez (2004), patriarchal societies favor a pattern of affective and sexual relations stressing power as the utmost appealing factor men can wield, and beauty as the most valuable such resource in the case of women. As Berger says (1972), a man's social presence stands on the solidity of the promise of power it embodies (an outwardly projected power that is, as it is to be exerted on others), whereas a woman's presence expresses an external attitude towards herself – it defines what can and cannot be done to her. Both Berger (1972) and Mulvey (1975) think the sight of the female body captured by the camera (or on a canvas) has been historically aimed at a male viewer that will presumably take pleasure in such a vision. What is more, according to Mulvey (1975), women have internalized that male gaze and apply it to their own self-representations and self-assessments – this condition is what Mulvey calls to-be-looked-at-ness. Berger agrees: «Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another» (Berger, 1972: 46). For Dyer (1982), this idea of gazing as a sign of power and of being gazed at as a sign of powerlessness overlaps with the dichotomy activeness-passiveness at large. He thinks one should not oversimplify looking as a concept by saying that the act of looking is active and the state of being looked at is passive. Yet even when they are not apparently active, many of these men's pictures still tend to promise some kind of activity from the way they pose—their physiques may look relaxed, but the model(s) posing tense their bodies and muscles, thus drawing attention to the body's action potential. The normalcy with which we assume such a display of brawn legitimates male power and domination. Such gender differences are also apparent when models do not look potential viewers in the eyes.

Thus, while female posers normally appear in such cases to be looking somewhere else, averting the viewer's gaze while showing modesty, patience or lack of interest, male models' eyes are more generally set somewhere in the distance or aimed upwards (suggesting spirituality, rather than coyness or modesty). At the same time, when models return a viewer's gaze, female posers do so with an inviting smile of one sort or another, whereas male ones tend to give more intent looks or still stares.

### 3. Methodology

Our research used a non-probability sampling technique known as snowball sampling to select 400 Fotolog pages from young users who utilized this service for self-presentation (among other purposes). Since 45 accounts were closed while the analysis was being carried out, the final sample contained 355 profiles. Pages researched belonged to Spanish users (28 percent male; 72 percent female) comprising 11 different friend networks; all of them were aged 13 to 18. Although on a photoblog one can find text features, such as nicknames, captions and visitors' comments, in this case, we only took pictures (photographs) into account, as they provide the representational strategies that allow us to study hyper-ritualization – these strategies are centered on poses and we studied such poses and the way they reflect and shape gender displays identified in the abovementioned scholarly work on advertising. Eighteen profiles (six boys and twelve girls) were chosen for qualitative analysis as well. Each of these 18 users' albums contained over one hundred pictures. Our qualitative analysis looked deeply into the full content of these teens' photoblogs. Virtual albums studied had differing sizes – in the case of girls, the album with the most photographs had gathered up to 1,400 of them, and the one with the least had 229 pictures in all; the boys' longest album had 747 photographs, while the shortest was 150 pictures long. Some of these albums had been updated by their owners for more than three years. Therefore, they cover a significant time in these users' teenage years.

In line with the goals of our study and the research's theoretical framework, we tried to answer the following research questions:

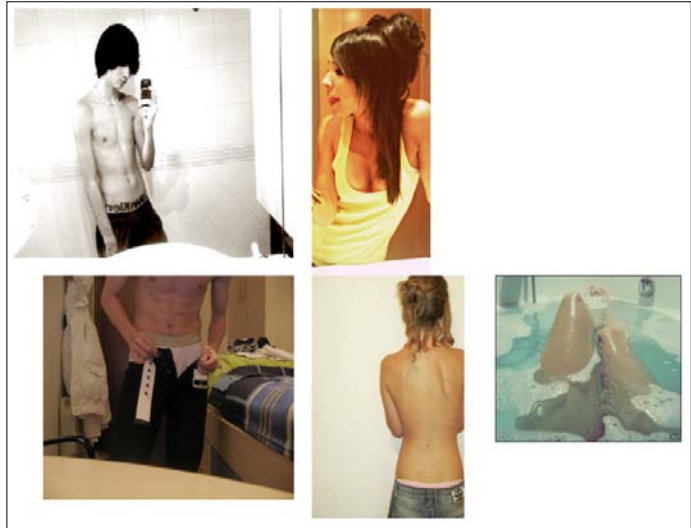
- What kind of self-presentation do Spanish adolescents engage in through the pictures they take and edit for Fotolog?
- What types of hyper-ritualization and what advertising figures do we find in these Spanish teenagers' self-presentations from the photographs they prepare for and post on Fotolog?

In the quantitative analysis, the following two categories were considered: to-be-looked-at-ness and hyper-ritualization (which, in turn, was subcategorized into the ritualization of subordination and licensed withdrawal). In the qualitative analysis, on top of the former, the following categories/elements were thrown into the analytical mix: the feminine touch, sixpack displaying, sexual subjecthood, and the lesbian pose. Following Goffman's (1979) and Gill's (2007, 2009) studies on advertising, we applied a technique that combines deduction (from those concepts we defined above, in the «theoretical background' section) and inference (searching for new trends or categories). Finally, and considering media's ambivalent potential (Habermas, 1987; Kellner, 1995), we paid attention to both the ideology that structures gender displays and the forms of resistance present in Fotolog representations.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. To-be-looked-at-ness (gaze and nudity)

Although just above half of self-portraits and photographs in which these young users display themselves show them in clothing devoid of sexual overtones (53 percent of boys' pictures and 57 percent of girls'), about 42 percent of boys and 40 percent of girls take shots of themselves scantily clad, or in tight-fitting or sheer clothes. No-one shows himself/herself fully naked in their photoblogs' pictures, and they hardly ever appear in their underclothes (only 5 percent of



Picture set #1: Gender-biased eroticization of self-presentations.

pictures posted by boys and 2 percent of those uploaded by girls).

Both boys and girls tend to eroticize their self-presentations with similar perseverance. However, girls usually appear in décolleté outfits showing the upper part of their breasts (15 percent of them), or in very short ones, baring their legs (6 percent). Boys, though, opt more often for flexing/showing their muscles or for displaying other signs of physical strength (28 percent). In many of these eroticized boys' self-shots we can see them looking in the mirror, showing off their brawn; girls, though, tend to be shown looking at themselves, displaying or even admiring their own bodies. Twelve percent of these teenagers (male and female) take pictures of themselves showing some kind of teasing look or attitude.

This confirms similar patterns found in other studies on social networking sites. Thus, Siibak (2007; 2010) found that, even if boys prefer to pose clothed, 34.2 percent let viewers see their athletic bodies. Girls play on stereotyped sex roles and 42 percent of their photographs can be classified under a demand/seduction category. And while female posers are more prone to be smiling in their own pictures (65 percent), male ones tend more often to portray themselves with a rather serious air (46 percent).

Boys highlight their muscles—their sixpacks (Gill, 2009)—and their body's potential for action, thus stressing their power (Dyer, 1982), whereas girls seem to be making a show of themselves to pleasure the male gaze (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975) or to pleasure themselves (Gill, 2007). This means that, in their self-presentations on social networking sites, they are

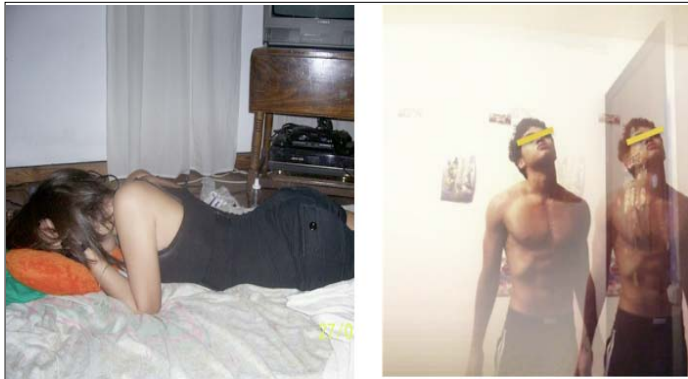


Picture set #2: The ritualization of subordination.

reproducing classical representation patterns where women try to emphasize their attractiveness and men try to show themselves as strong and powerful subjects (Manago & al., 2008).

#### 4.2. The ritualization of subordination

Even if adolescents tend to take pictures of themselves alone (70 percent of times in the case of boys, and 50 percent for girls), when they appear with people from the opposite sex, 7 percent of girls do so in a position of inferiority, compared to 1 percent of boys. Postural differences are not very significant overall, but



Picture set #3: Licensed withdrawal.

girls tend to be kneeling down or bending over more often than boys do (25 percent to 14 percent).

Girls do more frequently take photographs of themselves displaying happiness (19 percent of them, compared to 9 percent of boys), though boys show themselves in more playful and affinity-seeking attitudes than girls do (26 percent of times compared to 19 percent).

Many sexualized images are photographed in private domestic spaces, such as a bathroom or a bedroom. In such shots, girls usually appear sitting down or lying on a bed (and, at times, even on the floor). They are more frequently seen in childish poses, taking on a Lolita appearance or simply crossing their legs. Boys never pose that way. Sometimes, fragmented body takes in girls' photographs suggest infantilization and/or self-offering.

#### 4.3. License withdrawal

Although subjects tend to look in the camera when they take photographs of themselves (58 percent of times in the case of girls; 45 percent in the case of boys), they also appear to be gazing into space in quite a few pictures (14 percent of times and 16 percent respectively). However, girls tend to fit a pattern already

described by Goffman (1979), as in many such pictures they seem physically present yet mentally absent, whereas boys fit more closely Dyer's (1982) model, as they show resolve, strength or solemnity even while looking upwards, intently or at some indefinite point beyond the viewer.

Concern, engrossment in one's thoughts, and sadness are other emotions significantly displayed by adolescents in their pictures. Together with surprise and confusion, these are noticeable in 15 percent of girls' photographs and 16 percent of boys'.

Commonly, close-up shots are less sexualized, yet they tend to imitate the hyper-ritualization of licensed withdrawals – posers gazing into space or into the floor, or focusing their look somewhere in a far distance, or even smoking. Other representations directly related to this type of gender display are those we find in photographs where we see a girl looking out of a window apparently engrossed in her own thoughts, or lying on a bed while she covers her face with her hands.

#### 4.4. The feminine touch

Such poses as those in which girls caress objects or their own bodies (either with their hands or with other limbs or parts of their anatomy) are not very frequent in general, though they are more so in female full-body portraits or close-up shots.

#### 4.5. The lesbian pose

There is a small yet significant number of images where girls take on (or play with) the so-called lesbian pose. In over half of the photoblogs we analyzed, we found this type of photographs. In them, female teenagers show themselves kissing other girls or suggesting erotic dares or situations with their girlfriends, even



Picture set #4: The feminine touch.



though these are not accompanied by any explicit statement of homosexuality and, from context, one can see these are girls currently engaged in heterosexual relationships. Such lesbian poses seem to target a heterosexual male gaze (rather than a homosexual female one) or to be struck for mere self-pleasuring purposes; they are far from being a defining statement of those girls' sexuality and sexual orientation. However, the intent of these poses and displays among girls can be rather ambiguous at times, as they might even be conceived as a challenge of sorts to society's male dominant culture – as, for instance, when in one of those picture captions, one of the girls says «we don't need men to be happy or satisfied». In another example taken from one of those posts, we see three girlfriends kissing each other's lips. This photograph is then captioned as follows: «With the utmost indifference to you guys, signaling their utter rejection of boys» behavior (as, in this case, one of the girls had just broken up with her boyfriend because she had seen him kissing with another girl and he was not treating her right after the break-up). In any case, without knowing the girls' intentions and the consequences of this kind of practices, it is difficult to appraise to what extent such representations aim at reproducing or at transforming those patterns already present in the dominant culture. All we can say is that these girls' appearance is not that of the hot lesbian described by Gill (2009) and that they do not seem to be merely exposing themselves to men or trying to satisfy male fantasies by imitating pornographic models and clichés.

In some cases, pictures of girlfriends kissing each other are posted right after their posers have gotten into a heterosexual relationship, while others seem to be displayed as a challenge to a model of masculinity that challengers perceive as aggressive to them. Comments by other female friends add to photoblog owner's photos and texts to underscore such a message, such as when they define this type of boys as «monsters» or state that falling in love with «the first jerk» you find in your way is «so» out of fashion.

To address their girlfriends, these girls use at times forms of address such as «my lesbo», «wife» or «lover». Girls play with these words, although this seems to be more of a pose or a boundary-testing exercise than a transgression proper. A few examples: «lesbos 4 life», «hey there people, well, today this one's for my lesbo and I, luv u lesbooo, bride».



Picture set #5: The lesbian pose.

## 5. Final debate and conclusions

What images and contents teenagers decide to post and share in their own self-generated media outlets is a conscious decision (Livingstone, 2009; Stern, 2002, 2004; Siibak, 2010), which shows in the reflexivity we can clearly read in captions and other texts accompanying many such pictures. As other authors have pointed out (García, 2010; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Seivick-Bortree, 2005; Sveningsson, 2008; Thelwall, 2008), both in the intensive (on-line) and the extensive (off-line) uses and spillover effects of Fotolog one can see the importance social networking sites have for these youngsters' socialization processes.

Oftentimes, boys and girls produce highly sexualized self-presentations, both through their nicknames (in 20 percent of them) and through the pictures they post (in 40 percent of them). Quite a few nicknames reflect a gendered sexual role pattern: female passivity vs. male activeness. Boys tend to signal in their names what they can do (to girls), whereas girls emphasize what others (boys) can do to them, thus reproducing traditional models of attraction (Gómez, 2004). The same thing happens with photographs. Thus, insofar as both boys' and girls' bodies appear eroticized, male posers tend to show themselves in active poses and post images focused on physical strength (muscled abdomens and/or torsos), whereas female ones devote a much larger amount of attention to beauty and intimacy, showing low necklines, close-up takes of their lips, or bare legs, back or shoulders. Girls are also more often shown lying down, kneeling down or offering themselves to a potential viewer—that is, as exposed, passive, subordinated bodies, ready to be admired. Our data indicate that there is an internalization of socially constructed representations of masculinity and femininity, very similar to those easily available in advertising, where they become hyper-ritualized. Teenagers' self-presentations reproduce some of those



patterns about gazes, gender displays and body sexualization already described by authors such as Goffman (1979), Berger (1972), Mulvey (1975), Dyer (1982) and Gill (2009). These categories—originally defined in the analysis of advertising messages—are equally useful to explain some adolescent practices on Fotolog, which not only shows that self-presentations on SNS fit longer-standing gender stereotypes (Sveningsson, 2007), but also demonstrates that many such poses draw on tendencies already witnessed in advertising (Siibak, 2010). Goffman's concept of hyper-ritualization also seems appropriate to describe such a *mise en scène*. Such reproduction of hegemonic models of masculinity and femininity in teenage self-presentations might very well reflect the importance of social networking sites as spaces for the displaying of an aspirational or idealized identity – a «hoped-for possible self» (Manago & al., 2008; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008; Young, 2009).

After all, and contrary to those approaches that view audiences as passive entities being on the receiving end of media's influence, teenagers appropriate narratives about attraction and attractiveness and express and share their own understanding of it – and Fotolog and other SNS allow us to observe these appropriation processes. In fact, our analysis has identified other forms of representation that we may read as the combined result of: (1) some specific codes and templates generated on Fotolog, (2) a creative appropriation of gendered media representations, and (3) an individually chosen self-exposition.

Our qualitative analysis showed that girls mainly resort to three major representation strategies – they may try to portray themselves after what Willem & al. (2012) have termed supermodels, languid romantics or trash chic girls. Convergence of so manifold images from different teenage girls into those three groups bears witness to the strength of reciprocal peer influence and to the establishment of patterns (Sevick-Bortree, 2005; Stern, 2002). In the case of boys, photographed portraits of themselves flexing muscles seem to be a predominant feature, but in their pictures they also attach a great deal of importance to friends and to their own subculture traits, as well as to other characteristically male hobbies and interests—sports, cars, motorcycles, girls. Within these general patterns, there is plenty of individual creativity. Our findings suggest that teenagers engage in rather complex media practices resulting from the reproduction of gender stereotypes and patriarchal patterns—partly through an imitation of models seen in advertising, partly through an appropriation and reshaping of those models, that may

even result in an opposition of sorts to some patterns of attractiveness that are considered to be hegemonic. To test and confirm these research results a reception study would be in order. Such a study would allow us to identify how teenagers interpret their own practices and what consequences these have for their own affective socialization.

As Ringrose and Eriksson (2011) say, social networking sites are spaces of risk and opportunity deeply affected by gender, and are becoming arenas for negotiation in an increasingly sexualized media environment. As our study shows, self-presentations in SNS resort to the kinds of representational strategies already seen in those media environments and even contribute to spread, popularize and normalize them. To prevent these young SNS users from unthinkingly reproducing stereotypes gender patterns and to bring them to contribute to a critical negotiation of such representations, media education should take into account the way adolescent practices in social networking sites are being fueled by the consumption of other media products, such as advertising (as pervasive a presence as it gets), and how this bears on what adolescents express in those networks and on their own identity definitions. SNS are spaces where teenagers have a conversation on gender, love, desire and attraction, and therefore they can be used to turn socialization from reproductive into alternative by promoting other models of femininity and masculinity based on the kind of reflexivity those very adolescents' media practices already reflect.

## Notes

1. Fotolog ([www.fotolog.com](http://www.fotolog.com)) is an open-access social networking site. This allows researchers to have full access to all content posted on its pages. Fotolog is made from photographic posts uploaded by its users on a daily basis and accompanied by captions or other texts attached by them. People belonging to a user's network can add comments to his/her posts, although a user can always block that function.

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